TO SEE BETTER
Mark 10:46-52
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He came from a world beyond our own on a dark night, and made his first home a shed behind the house. He was a stranger to the world, unattractive, different. And yet he was accepting and kind and almost naive in his innocent simplicity. When his friend was injured, he healed the hurt. His spirit of love united a group of uncaring cynics in a great adventure of following him near the end of his life. In a mysterious way he began to live within his friend and promised that he would always be with him in his heart. For some reason the authorities were threatened by him, frightened, and hounded him to his death. But even death could not contain him. After appearing to his small band of friends, insignificant people, and confirming their faith in him, he disappeared, ascending to the other world from which he had come.

The story of Jesus as presented by the first century Gospels? No: actually it is the plot of this summer's smash box office hit, "E.T. - The Extra-Terrestrial", a delightful movie featuring a being from another world who spends some time on earth, mostly in the California home of a recently divorced woman and her three children, Michael, Gertie, and Elliot. I claim no extra sensitivity in noticing the religious symbolism and the parallels between the life of Jesus and E.T.'s brief sojourn on earth. I had read detailed reviews underscoring the clear theological possibilities in Dick Campbell's Citizen-Journal Editorial, in the New Yorker, and the New York Times before seeing the movie. Even the newspaper ad is a pop rendition of Michaelangelo's "God and Adam" from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

It was possible, of course, to enjoy the movie apart from any religious meaning and most people, I hope, did. In fact, one of the most important ideas conveyed throughout the movie is not specifically religious at all - at least it doesn't seem to be at first. It is that two people can see the same object, yet perceive two different things, come to two different conclusions. What the movie is really all about, I think, is adult inability to see what is perfectly clear to a child.

The significant incident happened early in the story. Having hidden the strange creature, E. T., in his room, Elliot introduces him to his older brother Michael after a vow of secrecy. His little sister Gertie happens on them by accident. In a very funny sequence both are startled and scream, the mother inquiries about the noise. After a very close call and the near disaster, the children talk among themselves.

The older brother says, "Elliot, we've got to tell Mom."
"We can't, Michael. She'll want to do the right thing. You know what that means don't you?" Elliot pointed at E.T. "He'll wind up as dog food."
"You're not going to tell, are you, Gertie? Not even Mom?"
"Why not?" Gertie asks.
"Because - grownups can't see him. Only kids see him."

Elliot is correct of course, and that's the point of the movie: an idea which at least suggests Jesus' statement that people who wish to see the kingdom of God have to become like children, or at least correct their sight so that they can see like children see.

Two people often see the same object quite differently. An adult often sees a person, an event, an object, significantly differently from a child. When adults risk watching for a moment what transpires at a rock concert, we are inclined to see an all-out assault on the value structure of Western civilization. Obviously, it is nothing of the kind, and in this instance, at least, our youngsters see this a lot more clearly than we do.

It was truly a revelation to me to discover that two scholars can tell the story of the same event quite differently. I had assumed that facts are facts and so was surprised to discover that distinguished historians differ sometimes radically, when discovering events in the past. It is called the "Historian's Historicity", and all it means is that even historians have a point of view, a perspective. For instance, the history of the North American continent is a very different matter when it is told from the perspective of the native peoples who lived on the land for thousands of years. The high school textbooks I read described a rather heroic sequence of discovery, exploration, conquering, civilizing, settling. It was a lot of reading and maturity later that I realized the same events can be and are perhaps even more accurately described as invasion, attack, robbery, extortion, exploitation, and genocide. After all, whether it is a reservation or a concentration camp depends on who is telling the story.

So it is when one encounters the South's version of the American Civil War, or any major event in history. I am reminded of a vignette attributed to Winston Churchill during one of his visits to this country. He was holding a press conference. A reporter referred to his prodigious thirst, pointing out someone's estimate that the brandy Sir Winston had drunk in his lifetime would fill two thirds of the space of the small room in which the conference was being held. "What do you think about that?" he asked. "What I think about, young man," Sir Winston replied, "is how much more work I have to do till I have completed this job." What you see depends on your point of view.

The text is the account of Jesus curing a man of blindness: helping him to see clearly. Modern men and women are not sure what to make of miracle stories such as this one and are inclined to be distracted from the meaning of the incident in the discussion of whether or not it actually happened. The earliest oral tradition of the Christian church included this event obviously. But there is no way either to prove that it did or did not happen. Certainly there is a sense in which it is a miracle everytime sight is restored: instantaneously as in this story, or as a result of intricate, careful surgery performed at University Hospital. In fact there is a sense in which the miraculous is heightened for me at least, when sight is restored in the surgical arena. In addition, there are just enough unpredictable cures throughout the field of medicine to make even the most dogged empiricist nervous on occasion.

The point, here and elsewhere, is that Jesus helps people to see: He gives sight to the blind, clarity to the confused, light to those who live in darkness.

The man in question was named Bartimaeus, He was an outcast, poor, a beggar, with no one to care for him. When he called out to Jesus, the crowd told him to be quiet. But he persisted. Jesus heard him, called to him and asked him what he wanted. "My sight," the man replied.

By noticing the blind man in the crowd, Jesus himself demonstrated part of the miracle of restored sight. He also demonstrated that having one's sight means using it to see everything. The blind man couldn't see, but, in fact, his culture had made him invisible. He didn't count. He was a beggar. The first miracle here is that Jesus saw him! That kind of sight is not always a pleasant gift, by the way. How easy it is not to notice - particularly the outcast. How easy it has become simply not to see those who make us uncomfortable, those who we know are somehow the losers, the victims in the system in which we are the winners. Nobody wants to see the State Penitentiary next door. Nobody in Columbus wants to have to look at the people who stay in the Open Shelter and so, for the moment, there is no Open Shelter. Do we suppose that those people are simply going to disappear because we don't want to look at them? What are we to do with these people who knock on the door of this church, saying nothing more articulate than the blind man's "Have mercy on me, Lord." - sometimes asking for $100 or $200 or $300 - because poor people can't afford to be warm and it will take that much just to get the gas turned on which was cut off last spring; or $20 for food; or a pair of shoes; or a couple of dollars to drown despair in a bottle of whiskey. "Am I my brother's keeper?" William Sloan Coffin asks, and answers, "No I am not. In Christ I am my brother's brother." In a time when politicians talk about balancing budgets by reducing aid to people who are unemployed, and old, and handicapped, and hungry, and without hope, someone, somewhere in the system must insist that we are dealing with human beings and not sociological data. Someone has to be able to see that clearly. It is not a cheerful responsibility. It does not feel good. It is, I submit, the responsibility of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Two people can look at a single object and see it altogether differently. There is a sense in which there are at least two ways to see everything; superficial observation and a deeper, more profound perception - really seeing a thing for what it is. That's what good art does, by the way; helps to see the truth, the reality hidden in ordinary objects. The late Howard Lowry, President of the College of Wooster, one time defined a liberal education as "...the ability to see things as they are, not as they half are." (College Talk, p. 124) That is always a miracle, a special gift. Suddenly an ordinary afternoon sky becomes an irredescent, heavenly blue. Suddenly, the grace and joyful goodness of your spouse is clear and unmistakable. Suddenly the miracle of your children, flesh of your flesh, their brains, bodies, emotions, their hopes and dreams, stand forth in sharp color and you see clearly, and it is a God-given miracle. Lowry cited Tolstoy's complaint that we had lost the capacity to notice - to attend to the important things in life until the near thought of death brings us to the sense of them. "A pity" wrote Lowry. "It means missing so much now - this side of the hospital corridor. So much of ardor, so much of joy, so much of beholding." (p. 128)

"Behold! Look!" - the word is in the Bible more than three hundred times. The Bible wants us to see everything: the magnificent entirety of creation, from crawling insects to shattering thunderstorm; the righteous rage of the prophet and the tender love of the virgin. The Bible wants us to see the whole wonderful handiwork of the creator, from the passion of human love to the utter tragedy of human conflict. W. H. Auden wrote a peculiar hymn once with a line that goes: "Follow him through the land of unlikeness; you will see rare beasts and have unique adventures."

The Bible suggests that profound religious experience is not so much seeing the extraordinary as it is seeing clearly with the simplicity of a child; not so much being transported out of this world - as being given sharpened sight to see the essence, the reality of the things and people of this world.

How good it would be, I often think, for people who are tired of one another; husbands and wives whose ardor has waned, and for whom the years together have depleted any sense of joyful surprise - to be able simply to see one another with new, innocent, honesty. How good it would be to clear the slate and see one another, not as a product of our accumulated expectations - but simply as we are. How good to be able to stand back and see our friends as they are: individuals who are charmingly and irritatingly different from us but who offer to us kindness, companionship, love, hope.

And how good, on occasion, to see this Jesus simply, openly; to set aside for the moment our struggles with doubt, our fervent wrestling with probability and possibility and to see, for one beautiful moment, this man so full of love that he noticed the blind beggar along side the road. The blind beggar got himself noticed because his blindness was not an embarrassment to him. His sight was restored because he simply cried out, "Lord, have mercy...my sight, my sight." We are free in Christ - you and I - to be at home with our humanity; to acknowledge our limitations, our myopia, our astigmatism. Because we are accepted, forgiven, and loved - we are wonderfully free to be unembarrassed by our blindness - to confess it and to ask our Lord to heal it.

Malcolm Muggeridge, former editor of Punch, was a skeptic about Christianity for most of his life. You recall, perhaps, that while he was working on a television special on Mother Teresa for the BBC, he began to feel the pull of Christianity. The result was a conversion and a very lively, almost simple Christian with compelling power, literacy, and wit. He refers to his becoming a believer throughout his book, Jesus, the Man Who Lives. I think his description is remarkable.

> "Suddenly, almost with a click, like a film coming into sync, everything has meaning, everything is real: and the meaning, the reality, shine out in every shape and sound and movement, in each and every manifestation of life, so that I want to cry out with the blind man to whom Jesus restored his sight: One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.....How, I ask, could I have missed it before? How not have understood that the silence, grey light across the water, the cry of the seagull and the sweep of their wings, everything on which my eyes rest is telling me of God?" (Jesus, the Man Who Lives, p. 25)

Jesus restored sight to a blind man one time. That miracle has been repeated time and time again in the lives of ordinary people. The ability to see clearly, honestly, without empediment has been given as a gift of grace. May it be so for us. AMEN.

God of grace, help us to see - ourselves - with courageous honesty - others, with your accepting love - and your son Jesus Christ, with the open trust of a child. AMEN.